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Commissioner

Leading the Way: The State of Education in Rhode Island 2012
Deborah A. Gist, Commissioner
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Speaker Fox, President Paiva Weed, Members of the General Assembly, Governor Chafee, Chairman Caruolo and Members of the Board of Regents, School Leaders, Teachers, Students, and all Friends of Education:

It is an honor to be with you once again to reflect on the state of public education in Rhode Island.

When I stood here before you a year ago, I suggested that each of us ask one another: How's school? Since then, I've been asking that question as I visit schools and communities across the state.

On my visits, I have seen examples of excellence and I have enjoyed meeting principals, teachers, and students who have been leading the way. I have seen innovative practices, and I've heard words that can inspire us all to do our best every day.

On a visit to Coventry High School, I was moved by the words of Julie Lima Boyle, our 2012 Teacher of the Year. Julie says:

Teaching for me is about always evolving, honing, researching, and finding new ways to communicate my love of reading and writing.

Julie wears a bracelet that bears a quote from Michelangelo on his 88th birthday that reads: *Ancora Imparo*. Or: I am still learning.

Thank you, Julie, for reminding us that teaching and learning is a lifelong process that involves all of us: students, teachers, parents, and members of every community. Julie Lima Boyle, the 2012 Rhode Island Teacher of the Year, is here with us tonight.

Two years ago, the Board of Regents approved our strategic plan, *Transforming Education in Rhode Island*. This plan set ambitious goals and set us on the path toward preparing all students for success in college, careers, and life.

Over the past two years, we have put our plan into action. We did so thanks to unwavering support for education from Governor Chafee and from the General Assembly.

Thank you, Speaker Fox, President Paiva Weed, and all members of the General Assembly for your support of key legislation, such as:

- The Funding Formula, which provides aid to education in a fair, transparent, and predictable manner to all of our communities;
- the Dropout Prevention Act, which is designed to keep students in school and lead them to graduation; and
- the Safe Schools Act, which led to our first statewide policy against bullying, including cyber-bullying.

We have put our strategic plan into action with leadership and support from the Board of Regents and from Governor Chafee, whose 2013 budget includes full funding for education initiatives. Thanks in large part to Governor Chafee's leadership, even in these tough economic times, when other states are cutting funding and programs, Rhode Island remains committed to public education.

The Governor and Regents Chairman Caruolo have just returned from the Hunt Institute Governors Education Symposium – part of their ongoing dedication to making Rhode Island a national leader in education reform.

With support from across Rhode Island, we have used state investments and our Race to the Top award:

- to begin annual evaluations that give all teachers and principals feedback and to improve teaching and learning;
- to deliver mentoring and support for every new teacher;
- to train more than 4,300 educators in the new, world-class Common Core standards;
- to support charter public schools that provide options for families and provide models to improve education across the state;
- to work with communities on accelerating the lowest-achieving schools toward greatness;
- to develop user-friendly data systems that provide better reports for the public and that provide teachers with information about the strengths and needs of their students; and
- to build the Uniform Chart of Accounts that provides all school leaders and the public with information and guidance on school spending.

We have also implemented new policies that put us at the vanguard of education reform. This year, we created and the Board of Regents approved:

- a new system that streamlines our certification process, linking licensure to educator effectiveness; and
- a statewide system for career and technical education in which all students can enroll in the program that best meets their learning needs and their career goals.

Thanks to these accomplishments and others, education is progressing in Rhode Island.

In fact, people around the country recognize that Rhode Island is leading the way in public education – and we should be proud of that!

In December, the U.S. Department of Education awarded us a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant, making Rhode Island one of only six states in the country to receive *two* Race to the Top awards. Together, these awards will bring Rhode Island \$125 million in federal funds to support our work in transforming education.

I thank our partners for joining with us to develop a truly broad-based proposal to help our youngest learners. These partners include:

- Governor Chafee and the leaders of the General Assembly,
- the Department of Children, Youth and Families;
- the Department of Health;
- the Office of Health and Human Services;
- Rhode Island Kids Count; and
- early-learning educators from across the state.

Based on the goals of our strategic plan, we have great policies and practices in place – and we are seeing results.

We are pleased that on the 2011 Nation’s Report Card, Rhode Island students met and surpassed the national averages for the first time in the 20-year history of this assessment.

A year ago, the annual “Quality Counts” report from Education Week, ranked Rhode Island 31st in the country among all states. This year, we moved up the charts - to a ranking of 20th in the country. This is a big one-year leap, and I know we can continue to rise to the top of that list!

Earlier this year, the National Council on Teacher Quality ranked Rhode Island 2nd in the country on the quality of our policies on the teaching profession.

These successes and this progress are possible because of our work together. Working together, we will implement these policies and reach the level of performance we know we need.

We will continue our partnerships with the NEA of Rhode Island, the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals, and the teachers they represent; the principals’ association, the superintendents’ association, the League of Charter Schools, the school committees’ association, and their members; Rhode Island state agencies and Rhode Island business leaders; early-childhood educators, adult educators, and leaders of afterschool programs; community-based organizations, parents, volunteers, and, of course, those at the center of everything we do – our *students* themselves.

We need to maintain these partnerships because, while we are leading the way on many fronts, we have a long way to go to meet our goals.

In February, we released our latest round of state assessments. The results made it clear that we must improve our performance, especially in mathematics. The results also made it clear that we must maintain our sense of urgency.

We know that our graduates will need knowledge and skills in mathematics and science to succeed in college and the careers in the 21st-century global economy.

For our part, we will continue to provide districts with support on curriculum and with tools, such as the new Virtual Learning Math Modules, that will help improve student achievement in mathematics.

Though our graduation rate has steadily improved to 77 percent, too many of our graduates are not ready for success:

- more than half of our graduates who enter CCRI need remedial classes in mathematics; and
- more than one of four students entering CCRI is reading below the 9th-grade level and needs placement in a remedial reading course.

We recognized this problem and took action to correct it. Under our new Diploma System, all graduates will demonstrate in a variety of ways that they have attained the level of proficiency to prepare them for success.

We are also working closely with our partners in Higher Education and the business community to link graduation requirements with standards for college readiness and career success. Preparing all students – including our students in adult-education programs – for college and challenging careers is the greatest investment we can make in our future.

Investment in public education is essential to the economic development and the future prosperity of our state. We must target these investments to ensure that we are effectively and efficiently using our resources to improve teaching and learning. One such targeted investment, the technology bond that Governor Chafee proposed in his 2013 budget, will provide wireless Internet access to every a classroom in Rhode Island, opening up the world and a wealth of resources to our teachers and students.

We must continue to support innovation, through such initiatives our as our Innovation Powered by Technology grant. This grant, which we will award later this month, will help a group of teachers rethink what we mean by the school day, the school year – and even our definition of what it means to be a school.

The highest priority in our strategic plan, *Transforming Education in Rhode Island*, is “ensuring educator excellence.” This means:

Every student must have excellent teachers; and

All teachers must have the resources, the support, and the autonomy they need to do their work well.

Our teachers are first and foremost professionals. As professionals, teachers need and deserve the latitude and the responsibility to make decisions within their classrooms. Our goal is to create a climate in every school where teachers can be innovative, creative, *and* accountable for results.

As all of us know, we have thousands of excellent students, teachers, and school leaders across our state. And some have joined us tonight.

First, let me welcome Tri Ha, a 17-year-old junior at Woonsocket High School. Tri emigrated to the U.S. with his family three years ago. In March, I was able to attend the American Mathematical Society statewide competition, “Who Wants to be a Mathematician?” which Tri won. Congratulations to Tri, and to his mathematics teacher, Ms. Suzanne Walker.

Earlier this year, I met 7-year-old Tommy Poirier, who was brave enough to speak to a whole group of adults and tell us, in his own words, what school has meant for him. Here’s what Tommy said:

When I first came to my special school, I did not talk much and I did not eat much ... But now, because of my [teachers] and therapists, I can read and write and do math. ... I have been in talent shows and plays. I stole the show. ... I am happy I came to the Collaborative.

Congratulations, to Tommy, his parents, and his teachers at the Northern Rhode Island Collaborative, especially Ms. Lana Kopacsi.

When I visited Pilgrim High School, in Warwick, I met Michael Lobdell, our current Milken Educator Award winner. Great science teachers like Michael are preparing students for success in the fields of science, technology, and engineering – growing areas of our economy. Thank you, Michael, and congratulations.

I am also pleased that we have six great school leaders with us this evening. I would like each of these incredible leaders to stand as I introduce them, and then join me in celebrating them once they are all standing:

- Susan Chin, of the Veazie Street School, in Providence, the Elementary School Principal of the Year;
- Gregory Zenion, of the Chariho Middle School, the Middle School Principal of the Year;
- Daniel Kelly, of Smithfield High School, the High School Principal of the Year;
- Jay Masterson, of North Cumberland Middle School, the Assistant Principal of the Year;
- Janet Lyons, of the Austin T. Levy School, in Burrillville, the Outstanding First-Year Principal; and
- Donna Ottaviano, of North Providence, the 2012 Superintendent of the Year

Congratulations to six of our best school leaders!

I have had the pleasure this year of visiting many schools across Rhode Island along with our partners at NBC 10 and Hasbro, to present Golden Apple awards to honor Rhode Island teachers. Thank you, CEO Brian Goldner and Karen Davis, from Hasbro, and Chris Lanni and Patrice Wood, from NBC 10, for your partnership on the Golden Apple recognitions.

For Golden Apple nominations, we asked the folks who know these teachers best: parents and students. I can tell you that we have received literally hundreds of great nominations.

Christine Healy, of North Kingstown High School, is one of our Golden Apple winners. A parent said about her:

I never thought my daughter would learn to read as well as she does, but Mrs. Healy perseveres! She is passionate about getting [her students] out into the community, which I know helps educate the community about our kids.

Robin Ryan, of Lincoln Central Elementary School, is another winner. A parent wrote about her:

Mrs. Ryan has been communicating sometimes two and three times a week. I love it. I have been able to engage my daughter in more meaningful conversations about her day because I have the information at my fingertips.

Some of our Golden Apple Award winners have joined us tonight. Would you please stand to be recognized? Join me in thanking each of them for the work they do every day!

Education can't work without great teachers, but great teachers cannot do their work alone. This evening, I want to recognize some of the schools from across Rhode Island where teachers, families, and school leaders have come together to achieve results. These are schools that are making sustained and dramatic progress. These are schools where students, parents, teachers and leaders are working together, getting results, and *leading the way*:

Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academy
Central Falls Senior High School
Chariho Regional High School
Citizens Memorial School (Woonsocket)
East Providence High School
Fort Barton School (Tiverton)
Dr. Joseph A. Whelan Elementary School (North Providence)
The Learning Community Charter School
North Smithfield schools
Ponaganset Middle School (Foster Gloucester) and
Westerly High School

We have invited educators, students, and others from all of these leading schools to be with us tonight, and I would like to ask them to stand for recognition. Congratulations!, and thank you.

These schools are leading the way because they are implementing important practices that are part of our strategic plan. These are strategies we want to see successfully used in every school in our state. In these schools you will find educators:

- providing professional development and common planning time for teachers;
- offering an extended school day or school year for students;
- responding to individual student needs;
- sharing responsibilities across grade levels and across subject areas;
- using data to guide instruction;
- working as a team; and
- creating a culture of learning and a love of inquiry.

Later this evening, I hope you will be able stop by and visit with the students, parents, teachers, and principals from these schools at their display tables in the Rotunda area to learn more about what they're doing to support teaching and learning. Ask the folks from the BEACON School about math tutoring. Ask the team from Westerly High about "One Book, One School." Ask the folks from Ponaganset Middle School about their Problem Solving Team. Ask the teachers at Central Falls High School about how they improved their graduation rate by 17 points in one transformative year. The teachers and students from each of these schools have a story to tell and information to share.

In schools that are leading the way, teachers are engaged and focused, supported and respected. Students are animated and eager to learn. These are joyful environments where all are teaching and learning and where expectations are high for everyone – students, teachers, school leaders, and families.

Imagine if every student and teacher in our state had access to this kind of support. Imagine every family serving as our education partners and sending their children off to school ready to learn, and imagine if those families had absolute confidence in the quality of education their children would experience every day.

Transforming education in Rhode Island is about students, teachers, school leaders, family members, public leaders and officials like you, and each member of our community.

Just as teachers cannot do their work alone, schools cannot do their work without community support. The historian David Matthews has pointed out that in early-American education: "The community wasn't just 'involved' with its school; the two were inseparable."

I would say the same holds true today.

The quality of our public schools is evidence of the character of our state. The quality of our public schools directly affects our economy and the quality of life for every Rhode Island family.

Every community in our state has sources of pride. We are proud of our local sports teams, our rich history, and our beautiful landscapes and shoreline. We even take pride in being the smallest state. As a one-time Texan, I love seeing the T-shirt that declares: “Don’t mess with Rhode Island either.”

My vision is that, just as we are proud of our teams and our topography, we will be equally proud of our schools, our teachers, and our students. My goal is to see people wearing a T-shirt that declares: “Rhode Island: Home of America’s Best Public Schools.”

Imagine that day. Really, just picture what having the best public schools in our country would mean for our state, for our economy, for our neighborhoods, for our families, for our children.

Now, *believe it* because we can make it happen.

Look up and around at these teachers and principals, students and parents. Look around at all of us in this room. We won’t always agree, and the work will be hard. But we will persevere.

We will continue working together - so that people in every neighborhood in our state will be proud of the quality of our public schools. We will continue making progress and leading the way – so that the quality of our public schools will make every Rhode Islander proud of the character of our state.

We *can* do this – but we cannot lead the way alone.

We are racing to the top, we are on our way toward great schools, and, as, Julie Lima Boyle, our Teacher of the Year reminds us, we are always learning.

Let us continue learning from one another; let us lead the way toward greatness – *together*.

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